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“The ability to get a job”: Student understandings and definitions of employability

Abstract

Purpose- The purpose of this paper is to explore employability in the context of Higher Education from the students’ perspective. Limited attention has been paid to student understandings of their own employability and Tymon (2011) refers to them as “the missing perspective”.

Design/methodology/approach- This paper presents the findings of a study of Marine Sports Science students (n=63) at a post-1992 Higher Education Institution which through the qualitative element of a mixed methods survey explored their changing articulations of their employability as they progressed through their studies. The students surveyed were in receipt of a comprehensive programme of enterprise and employability activities embedded within their programme.

Findings- Qualitative results showed that Marine Sport Science students’ articulations of employability expanded in vocabulary as the students progressed through their studies. Definitions also shifted from those that centred on what employers want (extrinsic) to what the student had to offer the employer (intrinsic).

Originality/value- There are very few examples of papers that explore employability from the students’ perspective and this paper adds understanding on this “missing perspective”. It also addresses a specific discipline area; Marine Sport Science, which has yet to feature in any literature on employability.

Keywords Employability; Careers education; Enterprise; Employers; Curriculum.

Introduction

Why is employability an issue?

Helping our students improve their employability has been a significant theme in Higher Education (HE) in OECD countries since the 1990s, due to the substantial pressure of assorted stakeholders including government (e.g. BIS, 2011, Dearing 1997), employers (Archer and Davison, 2008), and students (e.g. CBI/NUS, 2011). These stakeholders exert pressure as a result of a number of factors including massification,

graduate labour market congestion and government policies related to the expansion of HE.

Massification has led to increased competition for graduate employment and a reduction in the currency of a degree (Brown et al 2011). Whilst new forms of graduate employment have emerged in the changing workplace (Elias and Purcell, 2004), demand for graduate jobs remains high. As evidenced in the careers advice directed at graduates through careers websites and services (e.g. Sharp, 2012), and as reflected in media discussion of graduate employability (e.g. Ardehali, 2015), graduates find that a degree is only a pre-requisite for their employment and that they must also deliver “value added” experience, skills and qualities (Tomlinson, 2008).

Awareness by students of graduate labour market congestion, coupled with the high cost of HE, means that employability is one of the most significant factors that affects their choice about where to study (Diamond et al, 2012). 76% of students who took part in the 2014 Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey reported that a key reason for attending university had been to improve their job prospects (Sodexo, 2014). It should be noted that institutional reputation, as well as employment opportunities are both components of the “employability” choice being made (ibid; Brown et al, 2011). In the UK, increased transparency of data on graduate employment prospects through mechanisms such as league tables, assists students in making informed choices about the anticipated return on their degree investment.

Government policies have promoted the expansion of HE on the dual premises of the need for graduate skills in a “knowledge economy” and on the personal, social and economic benefits provided through the attainment of a degree. HE has been seen by governments to be a “shared investment between the individual graduates and the state” (Tomlinson, 2008, p50) and a means of promoting economic growth. The ability

of this human capital approach to deliver, in terms of economic benefits to individuals, has been called into question (Brown et al, 2011, Tomlinson, 2008). Also, despite the focus on improving graduate employability, and having a larger pool of graduates to select from, employers have continued to express concern about students' "work readiness", complaining variously about their skills, experience and attitudes (e.g. Lowden et al, 2011).

What has been HE's Response?

Since the publication of the 2006 edition of Pedagogy for employability (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006), a substantial amount of work has been undertaken (Pegg *et al*, 2012), with HE Institutions and academics responding in diverse ways (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Pierce, 2002, Wilson, 2012) falling into three broad areas: encouraging students to make the most of extra-curricular opportunities; making available and promoting co-curricular activities (i.e. activities that sit outside the curriculum but which operate in tandem and are supportive of the curriculum); and embedding employability within the taught curriculum.

Recognition of the need for employability to be addressed by HE Institutions - both within curricula and through the holistic experience of university - is reflected in the guidance of UK government agencies. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2010) urges providers to embed employability in the curriculum, either as discrete modules or across a programme of study. "Joined up" implementation is encouraged with programme designers asked to "consider how staff and resources within the careers service, including career information and destination data, can be used to facilitate student learning" and to provide "clear links between subjects and career planning" in order to assist students in engaging with Careers, Education, Information, Advice and

Guidance (CEIAG) provision. Similarly, the HE Funding Council for England (HEFCE) states that;

Embedding employability into the core of HE will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring both significant private and public benefit, demonstrating HE's broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development.

(HEFCE 2011, p5)

But what does employability mean anyway?

There are a great number of definitions of employability available in the literature. According to a classic review of the literature by Hillage and Pollard (1998) the following aspects can be recognised within most definitions of employability:

- the ability to gain initial employment;
- the ability to maintain employment and make “transitions” between jobs and roles within the same organisation to meet new job requirements;
- the ability to obtain new employment if required;
- the quality of work or employment.

Examples of commonly cited definitions of employability that accord with this classification are given in Table 1 and a useful recent summary of employability definitions and models is given in Cole and Tibby (2013).

In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively, employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (eg personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work.

Hillage and Pollard (1998)

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy

Yorke (2006) (ESECT)

...a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy

CBI (2009, p8)

Table 1. Commonly Used Stakeholder Definitions of Employability

Hillage and Pollard (1998) proposed a much-used model comprising four components that make up an individual's employability, these being:

- 1) Assets (knowledge, skills and attitudes);
- 2) Deployment (career management skills, job search skills and strategic approach);
- 3) Presentation (the ability to present one's assets through CVs, interviews, references, qualifications etc.);
- 4) Personal and Labour market context (caring responsibilities, disability, job openings, selection behaviour of employers etc).

Yorke and Knight (2003) offer an alternative model, popular with academics because of its focus on learning. They identify four employability facets that they call the USEM model – USEM standing for Understanding; Skilful practices; Efficacy Beliefs; and Metacognition. However, the academic-facing USEM model is not simple for non-experts to understand (Cole and Tibby, 2013). Cole and Tibby suggest that the

model by Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) may be more usable. This model identifies career development learning; experience; degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills; generic skills; and emotional intelligence as necessary aspects of employability but that these must then be reflected upon and evaluated in order to maximise the learning and articulation of these aspects. Finally, self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem are seen as further moderating one's employability.

From these definitions we can see that employability is a multi-faceted and sometimes elusive concept that is hard to pin down (Cranmer, 2006, p172) and there is “a wealth of interpretations and measures across different disciplines” (Vanhercke *et al*, 2013, p592). However, there is general agreement in that it involves the following aspects: the capability of obtaining work, functioning effectively within work; moving between jobs/roles; and having the skills, knowledge and attributes that make this possible.

Students' perspectives of Employability

Like many academics focusing on graduate employability, Tsitskari *et al* (2014) believe employers are the most influential stakeholders and the literature on the employer's perspective is extensive. However, limited work has been done on what the term means to undergraduate students; a critical absent contribution. Tymon (2011, p9) terms this stakeholder group as “the missing perspective”. As primary stakeholders, it is important that we understand student perspectives on employability as it gives the opportunity to focus on the individual and situate relationships with the factors that are input to employability (Vanhercke *et al*, 2013), benefiting HE providers, students, and organisations (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Vanhercke *et al* (2013, p593) define perceived employability as “the individual's perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining

and maintain employment” and note five important aspects of this definition; that it is a subjective evaluation of employability; it concerns what Bernston and Marklund (2007, cited in Vanhercke *et al*, 2013) describe as the “possibilities” of employment; that employability is relevant across the labour market and throughout a career; that it not only involves the current employer but other possible employers; and finally, that it concerns both quality and quantity of employment.

Of the few studies that examine student perceptions of employability, Tymon’s (2011) research is the most methodologically similar to this study. Tymon collected data from first, second and third year students from Business studies/Business administration, Human resources, and Marketing programmes at a Post 1992 university. She found that overall the students had a narrower view of employability than that observed in the wider literature. This was particularly so for first and second year students: “They seem to believe that employability is a short-term means to an end, being about finding a job, any job, or employment” (p12). Students also conceived of their employability as being about the development of skills and personal attributes. The skills and attributes described mapped onto those commonly described in the literature.

Rothwell et al (2008) sought to examine what students thought about their chances of success in seeking a particular type of work, and what factors influence their perceptions of this success. Their statistically-based study focused on second year Business Studies undergraduates from three different universities. Their study demonstrated a general lack of confidence in employability across the three institutions in relation to how well the students perceived they would fair with their employability. Worryingly for academics, they also found that students perceive that engagement with their studies has limited influence on their employability (Rothwell et al, 2009, p159).

In a multi-disciplinary study of final year students from a pre-92 university Tomlinson (2008) posed the question “How do higher education students view the role of their degree credentials in shaping future employment prospects?” (p51). The students expressed their view of employability being in part about the “credentials” of their degree, and that this credential (what they studied, where, the grade) would assist them to get a job in a hierarchical labour market. More than this though, they also perceived the need for “extra credentials” such as their personal and social skills and experience. This was in response to high graduate employment competition. As Tomlinson describes, “students see the need to add value to their credentials in light of their weakening currency” (p59).

Tholen (2012) provides a fascinating comparison in the perceptions of employability of a group of final year students from Dutch and British Universities. Tholen’s study (p13) shows British HE students expressing their employability in terms of competition, measured by their exclusivity and distinction; it is all about standing out from other graduates. They also view employability as relating to being adaptable, flexible and possessing generic knowledge and skills. This interpretation echoes the findings of Tomlinson (2008). By contrast Tholen interprets the responses of the Dutch students as perceiving employability as being about finding one’s niche in the labour market. This involves students in a reflective process of developing their understanding of their own interests, strengths and weaknesses. Employability for these students seems to be more about a “trajectory” towards a part of the labour market that matches the students’ qualities, rather than, in the British context, “a hierarchy of jobs or a generic competition for jobs” (p13). Tholen’s interpretation is supported by other literature e.g. Tomlinson, (2012) and Little and Archer (2010).

From these few studies that examine employability from a student perspective, understandings and opinions represented are as diverse as they are in the wider literature on definitions of employability. They emphasise facets such short-term employability goals, employability “credentials” such as degree subject, institution and grade, extra-curricular experience and perceptions of employability as being a competitive pursuit. They have similarities to other stakeholder groups but they are less likely to emphasise the longer-term aspects of employability like sustaining and moving within the job market, and less likely to identify more holistic interpretations of employability such as contributing to the economy and society and finding fulfilling employment.

Sports Science Students and Employability

Minten (2010) notes that there is increasing concern about the employability of sport graduates in the UK, and goes on to highlight the low infiltration of graduates into the sport industry (Minten and Forsyth, 2014). Reflecting on the literature in this area, Tsitskari *et al* (2017) believe this is due to poor vocational preparedness, the sport industry’s deficiencies in industry management, and the ability to experience higher level jobs, challenges and better pay in other industries. More specifically, the graduate outcomes for Marine Sport Science programme students at the post-1992 HE Institution in this study, as reflected in the DLHE data (Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education), have been historically disappointing. For example, students graduating in 2009, had average earnings of £13,500, and were employed in predominantly non-graduate occupations. In order to improve this scenario, a strategy to utilise the resources offered by the Careers and Employability service within Marine Sport Science

programmes was developed (Author, 2012a and 2012b). This was based upon the QAA's (2010) guidance discussed above.

We intend to add to the literature on student understandings of employability by presenting the findings of a study looking at Marine Sport Science student's articulations of their employability. This is a discipline yet to be focused on in the employability literature, and one which carries its own employability challenges. We will examine changes in the sophistication of definitions of employability, shifts between extrinsically and intrinsically viewed perspectives in employability and comparisons to other stakeholders. In doing so, we will consider some of the influences on these understandings such as: employability interventions in the curriculum; self-efficacy; game playing tactics; and the temporal aspects of doing a degree (such as the time spent on degree/ and the influence of nearing the end point).

Methodology

Study Context

This paper presents an examination of the employability understandings of students from Marine Sports Science programmes at a post-1992 HE Institution in response to considerable systematic enterprise and employability interventions across the curriculum. It seeks to establish how these interventions have impacted on the developing employability understandings of the students as they progress through their programme and become graduates, and uses the student's definitions of employability to critically reflect on their enterprise and employability education. The findings therefore are not generalizable across other undergraduate programmes but they do give

an insight into how embedded careers education can effect students in the sport discipline.

In its development, it was important to consider how Marine Sport students, in general, differ from other HE students. Surfers, who make up the majority of Marine Sport Science students in this study, have historically been described as nonconformist (Stewart et al, 2008) and tend to belong to informal sport groups (e.g. surfing subculture). It was considered therefore, that embedding careers education within the programme through authentic experience, competitions and tailored activities and resources was seen as a means of tapping into their motivations and mind-set. Competitions in particular were emphasised because they are an integral part of sports (Vallerand and Losier, 1999), with these students potentially being driven by their extrinsic value to achieve. Similarly, a characteristic of enterprise activities and competitions is risk, and according to Ratten (2011:62) 'it is generally accepted that people participating in sport are risk-takers'.

The strategy therefore consisted of mandatory careers, employability and enterprise-related modules embedded within a core business strand of all three years of the Marine Sport Science programmes from 2011 (see Table 2). Contained within these modules were three competitive extra-curricular events: 1) FLUX, an annual inter-university competition taking students through the process of setting up a business ; 2) Hot Seat, an interview competition giving students from across the University the opportunity to win a chance to be interviewed by a selection of recruitment professionals from a wide variety of employers; and 3) the Business Ideas Challenge, a competition with business sponsorship which provides expertise to help teams develop a business idea. In their study focusing on the perceived employability of business

graduates, Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) found that engagement in extra-curricular activities might impact the students ability to “get ahead” in the selection process. They also found that extensive participation in extra-curricular activities such as those outlined above, coupled with high academic performance, lead to a perception that students were more employable in terms of job suitability, personal organisation and time management, and learning skills.

Year	Module	Embedded Activities within Modules
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing and Management in Marine Sport (2010-2011) • Employability and Enterprise in Marine Sports (2011-2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mini FLUX competition run in class, winner progresses to regional FLUX • Employability Portfolio (CV, Letter of application, Job seeking skills)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Based Learning in the Marine Sports Industry (2011-2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing Work Based Learning and undertaking placement • Hot set competition
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise in Marine Sports (2010-2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Ideas Challenge • Enterprise in Marine Sport Trade Show

Table 2. Summary of how employability and enterprise were embedded within core business modules across the Marine Sport Science Programmes

The above extra-curricular events were embedded into a module by including subject appropriate preparation activities in the module timetable, and involving the extra-curricular event within their assessment. Although the competitions themselves are not a new concept, embedding them within a module and using the events to form part of an assessment is (Smith et al, 2010). In his research on the impact of career management interventions in HE, Crust (2007, p17) found that undergraduate courses “typically used occasional teaching with little or no assessment to develop graduates’ ability to manage their careers and professional development”, suggesting that although

there may be attempts to embed careers education, it was yet to be an accepted form of assessment across HE curricula.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initial data collection utilised a qualitative survey of Marine Sports Science students from a post-1992 institution. The survey, consisting of both open and closed questions, was conducted at the beginning (September) and end (May) of the academic year. The survey was used in part to identify current and past Marine Sport Science Students' perception and understanding of the term employability and in part to evaluate the enterprise and employability curriculum interventions on their programmes. This paper focuses solely on student responses in relation to their understanding of the term employability. The survey was conducted within class time to maximise response rates. A total of 63 (74% of the cohort) participated from all three years of the programmes. There was difficulty in obtaining responses with the most recent graduates, with a total of only 5 responding (13% of the 2012 graduate cohort). Full details on response rates and demographic details of the survey respondents can be seen in Table 3.

		1st years	2nd Years	3rd Years
Response Rates	Total Population (N)	16	36	33
	No. of responses (n)	11	26	26
	Response Rate (%)	69	72	79
Age (%)	< 20 yrs	82	50	0
	20 – 25 yrs	18	50	92
	>25 yrs	0	0	8
Gender (%)	Male	73	77	81
	Female	27	23	19
Degree Course (%)	Applied Marine Sports Science	100	42	54
	Surf Science and	0*	58	46

	Technology			
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Table 3. Survey response details and demographic details of respondents. * No responses due to discontinuation of the programme.

Themes emerging from the questionnaire responses were identified and used to code the data. This coding enabled both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the former in relation to the frequency of terms used; the latter to provide a more detailed and nuanced interpretation of the attitudes and understandings expressed.

Discussion

The students' articulations of employability obtained in this study provide four noteworthy insights. Firstly, the definitions demonstrate a differentiation in the student perspectives of their own employability as they progress through their studies moving from definitions being about potential employer to definitions being more about oneself. This can be seen as a shift from an extrinsic to an intrinsic focus. Secondly, they show a changing sophistication in how they define the term employability. Thirdly, the learner definitions reveal differences in emphases to the definitions of employability of other stakeholder groups. Finally, a brief exploration of the career plans of the students are discussed which reveal a degree of uncertainty and short-term career plans emerging among third year students. These insights will now be explored.

An extrinsic to an intrinsic shift in defining employability

In response to the survey question "what does employability mean to you?", the majority of students framed their definitions through the notion of who considers their employability traits: the student/applicant or the employer? This created two distinct groups: One where students felt employability was more about an employer's

perception of the applicant; and one where students believed employability to be more about an applicant's perception of themselves (Table 4). Batistic and Tymon (2017) note that this is a typical feature of perceived employability where there exists an internal component relating to perceptions of oneself, and an external component considering factors outside of the individuals control, such as the employers perception. For the 1st years, there was an evenly distributed view of employability between those emphasising the employer's perceptions and those focusing on the applicant's self-perception. This ratio changed with the 2nd years to favour more the latter of the definitions, and was pronounced with the 3rd years.

	1 st years (n)	2 nd years (n)	3 rd years (n)
Employability is more about an employer's perception of the applicant (extrinsic perspective)	5	7	3
Employability is more about an applicant's perception of themselves (intrinsic perspective)	6	11	20
Student response did not conform to either category	0	8	3

Table 4. Frequency of extrinsically focussed and intrinsically focused student definitions of employability.

Those who felt employability was more about an employer's perception of the applicant included definitions for employability such as "how employable I am to an employer" (1st year student), "how an employer views a candidate's qualities for a job" (1st year student) and "the skill set, qualifications and attributes which make you attractive to an employer" (2nd year student). The employer was clearly the lens through which employability was seen for these students. In contrast, those who felt employability to be more about an applicant's perception of themselves included definitions such as "how well you are able to apply your skills to a desired job" (2nd

year student), “the cultivation of skills and experience relevant to my interests and aspirations for my career” (3rd year student) and “owning the traits and skills that make you appealing to the employer, as well as showing an interest and enthusiasm for the job” (3rd year student).

It is possible that this extrinsic to intrinsic shift in understanding occurs in part due to three reasons; 1) the embedding of careers education within the curriculum; 2) time in a degree programme; and 3) a game playing approach taken by students. Each year, the Marine Sports Science students come into contact with enterprise and employability modules (see Table 2) that help build their understanding of employability. Their ability to perceive employability over time as a concept that they have control and ownership over becomes more apparent, either through increased understanding and/or self-confidence. This apparent ownership may also be in part an expression of self-efficacy. Berntson *et al* (2008, p421) make the points that, whilst employability per se is not an expression of efficacy beliefs, “enhancing employability through, for example, education and training” could impact on employability. From the student responses, it is not evident that any one of these above reasons are more dominant in causing the extrinsic to intrinsic shift in understanding employability. Rather they may all play a role to varying degrees for different individuals. Tymon’s (2011) study of Business undergraduate students’ perspectives of employability, found an indication that confidence in self-expression increased year on year, and that final year students “were extremely confident in expressing their views” (ibid, 10). This was thought to be evidence of “enhanced communication skills and self-confidence”, suggesting that these skills have been developed over the academic years. Finally, there is also evidence that students are taking a game playing approach. The careerist student, as identified by Tomlinson (2007) and “player” as identified by Brown and Hesketh

(2004) understands the need to “play the game” in order to progress within the graduate labour market. Tomlinson (2007) noted how students had a high degree of self-location, taking an instrumental approach to developing their graduate profiles and highlighting their added-value credentials. Brown and Hesketh (2004) also noted the strategic nature of the “player” but in contrast to the findings in this study, they report that students’ attempt to align themselves with the employer.

The developing sophistication in defining employability.

When reflecting on student definitions of employability it was evident there was a changing sophistication in their definitions as they developed through the stages of their programme. Table 5 lists the key terms taken from the definitions of employability given by students and their overall percentage use within definitions per stage of their programme. From this table there can be seen a heavy weighting on three particular key terms in stage one (ability, qualifications and skills). Although the emphasis on skills remains throughout all three years, the development of a more diverse terminology increases year on year, expanding the sophistication of their definitions of employability. By their third year students have doubled the number of terms within their definitions of employability. These findings are comparable to those of Tymon (2011) who noted that students, in the first and second year of their programme, had a narrower view of employability than that observed in the wider literature. To address this limitation, Tsitskari *et al* (2017) and Minten and Forsyth (2014) note that the sport discipline in HE needs to cultivate a wide range of attributes among students.

In Yorke and Knight’s (2006) “Skills *plus*” project, they developed a list of 39 aspects of employability, each categorised (although they admit there are gaps and overlaps) under the following headings: Personal Qualities, Core Skills, and Process

Skills. If these category headings are applied to the terms put forward by students in their definitions of employability (See Table 5.), there is evidence that students predominantly use terms that fall within the Personal Quality categorisation and that Core Skills terms are limited, with little to no use of Process Skills (Such as planning, decision making and negotiating). Yorke and Knight (2007) believe efficacy beliefs and other personal qualities are one of four broad student attainments which make up employability and in particular “Personal qualities pervade employability”. In their 2004 study, Knight and Yorke found that the more process driven qualities, such as “the disposition to get things done, the taking of initiative, and the preparedness to stick at difficult tasks” (Yorke and Knight, 2007, p160) were less immediately visible. Our study mirrors this finding, with a lack of process skills and indeed process driven qualities featured in student’s responses. This is a concerning finding as in their work on the factors that influence graduate employability, Finch *et al* (2013) found that consistent with previous research, they noted that employers identified problem-solving skills such as critical thinking, similar to Process Skills, are viewed by employers as an important factor when reviewing a graduate’s employability. More specific to the context of this study, in their work with Greek sports employers, Tsitskari *et al* (2017) found that process skills such as “professional behaviour and development, leadership and influence, problem solving...[and] (inter)personal skills and communication ability” were the factors that sports employers expect from their employees. This is an incongruence that will need to be addressed by those working in the sport discipline within HE. However, it is worth noting that sports employers also indicate the importance of capabilities in all skills (Tsitskari *et al*, 2017), a finding confirmed by Asuquo and Inaja (2013).

There were several terms that did not fit the categorisation put forward by Yorke and Knight (2006) such as qualifications and money/salary. “Qualifications” were predominantly put forward by Year one students, and support an extrinsic focus of employability at this stage of the programme. In their study focusing on the perceived employability of business graduates by employers, Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) found that academic performance exceeds the worth of participating in extra-curricular activities at the expense of academic performance. A focus on qualifications may therefore be a worthwhile and necessary focus of student employability. Interestingly money/salary emerges only for Year 3 students, perhaps for those with a more strategic “game playing” approach. Some terms couldn’t be categorised easily, not because they fell outside of the categorisation, but because they sat above the three categories, encompassing all of them at once; these include terms such as “ability”, “capabilities”, and “requisites”, all of which could be seen as including elements of Personal Qualities, Core Skills and Process Skills. These were identified as “Cover all” categories in Table 5, and indicate that students were taking a more overarching approach in their choice of terms to define employability rather than drilling down to indicate specific elements. In this study, students were asked to define employability but were not asked to go further into dissecting the term. Further work on students’ understanding of employability could benefit from a more detailed examination by asking students to deconstruct the terms they provide or define its structure.

Key Terms	Skills <i>plus</i> <i>categorisation</i>	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
		Pct (%)	Use	Pct (%)	Use	Pct (%)	Use
Ability	Cover All	36		19		19	

Qualifications	Does Not Fit Categorisation	36	15	12
Skills	Core Skills/Process Skills	27	65	50
Attractive to employers	Cover All	9	7	4
Experience	Cover All	9	12	15
Personality	Personal Quality	9	7	12
Qualities	Personal Quality	9	4	
Requisites	Cover All	9		
Characteristics	Personal Quality		15	4
Communication of attributes	Personal Quality/ Core Skills		4	
Knowledge	Cover All		15	4
Attributes	Personal Quality		23	4
Traits	Personal Quality		4	4
Capabilities	Cover All			12
Money/salary	Does Not Fit Categorisation			8
Attitude	Personal Quality			4
Level of suitability	Cover All			8
Interest	Personal Quality			8
Enthusiasm	Personal Quality			4

Table 5. Frequency (%) of use of key terms to define employability

The expansion in how employability is expressed -from definitions emphasising skills and experience to more diverse definitions - may be seen as evidence of a more holistic and nuanced attitude and understanding of employability by the Marine Sport

students. It is of note, for example, that in their third year some students recognise the necessity of attitudinal traits such as “interest” and “enthusiasm”. Also of interest is the fact that the data shows an emergence of longer-term expressions of employability. None of the Year 1 students consider employability beyond “getting a job” but of the Year 3 students, a number spoke about employability in more sustainable terms. For example “the ability to be adaptable with your skills, experience, qualifications and personality in order to remain employable in the career paths you wish to follow” (Year 3 student). It is possible that having careers education embedded within the programme gives the students a more holistic view of employability, enabling them to think of employability as more than just finding a job.

Learner Definitions versus other Stakeholders

We have seen from the discussion above that, in tandem with their careers education, student definitions of employability become more sophisticated, nuanced, and demonstrate a greater degree of ownership of the term as they progress through their studies. Despite the developing understandings shown by these students, the focus of their definitions across all three years is very much about getting a job, irrespective of whether this is expressed in terms of what the employer wants from the applicant or what the applicant has to offer the employer. For example, “the cultivation of skills and experience relevant to my interests and aspirations for my career” (3rd Year). This provides a contrast to the definitions of employability cited in Table 1 by other stakeholders. In these definitions, in addition to stressing the act of gaining employment, these definitions also talk about how the individual “benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (ESECT, 2006) or “being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy

(CBI, 2009, p8). As Thijssen *et al* (2008) highlight, the attention of many of these definitions is wider than the individual gaining employment, encompassing wider stakeholders (the individual, the employer and the economy/community at large). For students, these definitions would appear to offer too broad a perspective to consider when offering definitions of employability that they can relate to. They, quite naturally, are more concerned with the context that is about themselves directly and which they may have control over rather than any benefit to others. As such, their definitions are more uni-dimensional compared to the multi-dimensional definitions, a feature noted by Forrier and Sels (2003, p105).

Career Plans

Students were also asked to consider what career plans they had when they graduated. There was a mixture of responses from students across all year's including short term and long term career plans, targeted ambitions, and those that were uncertain of their career plans after graduation. There was a fairly equal number of students with long term plans across all three years, however there was an increase in students with short term career plans at Year 3 (Year 1; 6.25%, Year 2; 2.75%, Year 3; 21%) and a number that were uncertain or had unspecified plans (Year 3;12%). Students have the opportunity to be more idealistic in their career aspirations at the beginning of their programme. However, as they near graduation, the realities of "just getting a job" become necessary and therefore short term plans are more dominant. This finding therefore may be reflective of a pragmatic and emotional response to the imminent prospect of having to find employment. Similarly, Purcell *et al's* (2009) study on findings from the 2006 Futuretrack Survey showed that during the application process, students were convinced that they had a very clear idea about their future occupations

yet as they progressed through their programme they were exposed to different ideas and so became less clear about their vocational orientation leading to the uncertainty in this study.

Conclusions

The definitions of employability offered in this research indicate that, as they progress through their studies, student definitions of employability become more sophisticated. In their first year of university the students tended to articulate their employability using simplistic language, and focus their definition *extrinsically*, on what an *employer thinks of the applicant*. By their third year, a wider range of terms were used to talk about employability, suggesting a more developed and sophisticated understanding and definitions were also more likely to be expressed *intrinsically*, *i.e.* what they had to offer to employers. This mirrors the findings of Tymon (2011) with students showing greater ownership of the term. However, none of the definitions provided by the students in this study encompassed the more holistic and multi-dimensional views of employability reflected in academic and employer definitions. The similarity in findings to that of Tymon (2011), who worked with Business students, also suggests there is no discernible “discipline” dimension to the definitions of employability offered by the Marine Sports students in this study.

Were the considerable careers interventions across the three years of their programme responsible for the observed shift in how employability is expressed or was this simply a result of maturity or a “game playing” approach? Most likely all these factors are at play. Yorke and Knight (2006, p7) emphasise that “development takes time – months and years”; that “development takes practice”; that students “need to hear repeatedly what it is intended that they learn” and that “programme level planning” for

employability is necessary. One would therefore hope that the embedding of employability in *the* curriculum discussed here did have a role, but we cannot know for sure. The more reflective and developed articulations of employability voiced by many of the third year students could also be interpreted as displaying a level of the metacognition (i.e. self-awareness) discussed by Yorke and Knight (2006). Perhaps then, student definitions can potentially be used as a qualitative measure of employability development.

The terms that the students used to define their employability were predominantly those that expressed Personal Qualities and not Process or Core Skills as defined by (Yorke and Knight, 2006). The terms they did use were often very broad and overarching, such as ability, capabilities and requisites, which provide limited detail as to how students understand the structure of employability.

Student career plans highlighted uncertainty and short term intentions becoming more evident for third year students. This has been interpreted as reflecting a pragmatic and emotional response to nearing the end of their studies and therefore the imminent need to get a job.

The increase in sophistication in defining “employability” coupled with students becoming increasingly uncertain of their career plans as they near the end of their programme highlights a dissonance between their understanding of employability and their ability to act on it.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that should be highlighted concerning this study. Firstly, approaching employability from the students’ perception does not provide any understanding as to why students perceive their employability in a particular way. It

therefore limits the ability for HEI's to implement specific actions. A second limitation is that like many studies in employability, this study used a case study approach which offers little opportunity in the way of generalisability, making it difficult to extrapolate or compare findings (Finch *et al*, 2013). Finally, there were difficulties in collecting data from recent graduates which led to low participation numbers in this population.

Future Research

This study also provides several recommendations for future research. These include the application of a students perceived employability in future research as it “integrates all possible personal and structural factors and their interactions” and provides an initial indication on the labour market position (Vanhercke *et al*, 2013, p599). Also, a need to address the difficulty in collecting data from graduates which has led to a lack of information available around the graduate transition from HE in to employment (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010).

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